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Interview Best Practices

What To Wear

Some great tips here! Skim through each article below and look for common themes:

- [How to Dress for Video Interview Success \(firsthand.co\)](https://firsthand.co/blog/how-to-dress-for-video-interview-success)
- [Dress for Success: What to Wear for a Video Interview | FlexJobs](https://www.flexjobs.com/blog/post/dress-for-success-what-to-wear-for-a-video-interview/)

Video Call Setup Tips

1. Always Sit FACING Your Main Light Source (Preferably Natural Light from a Window)

Sitting with your back to a window or bright light source will look awful. Whenever possible, sit facing a window, preferably more than one!

If you don't have a good forward-facing light source, open a white image or Word document on your external monitor or laptop and use that as a light source in front of your face.

2. Create a Three-Point Lighting Setup

Think of a clock: if you're facing a window straight-ahead at 12 noon, try to position additional light sources at 10 and 2.

3. No Bare Bulbs – Always use a lampshade

A lampshade will reduce harsh shadows and soften the lighting in the room.

Contrary to popular belief, the closer a light source is to a subject, the softer the shadows will play on that subject. So if a lamp is too harsh, bring it closer to you.

4. White, Light, or Bright Colors for Walls & Tables

Use white or light-colored walls and tables in your meeting spaces to brighten up the room with reflected light. White surfaces reflect light, whereas black surfaces absorb it.

5. Avoid using the “Blur” or “Image” background features

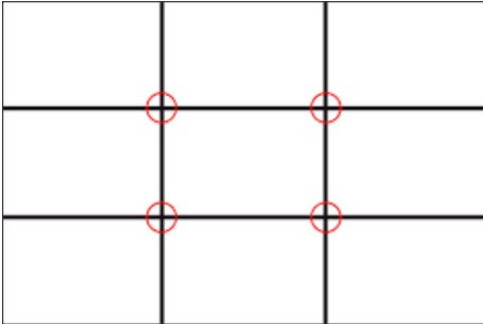
They look like you're hiding something... not a good indirect message to be giving your interviewer

6. Keep the camera at eye-level

Prop your laptop up on something if needed... avoid looking down at your subjects.

7. Uncluttered Background with No More Than 2 to 3 Items/Wall Hangings

Use the “rule of thirds” to split your background into an imaginary tic-tac-toe board. Now place those wall hangings at the intersection of the lines:



Some examples of simple, effective backgrounds to provide inspiration for your home office setup for interview day:



Lastly, here is a great article that gives additional tips for looking professional:

[How to Pull Off a Professional Video Call From Home | Wirecutter \(nytimes.com\)](https://www.wirecutter.com/nytimes.com/)

The Psychology of a Great Interview¹

Flip the interview. Turn the table. Gaining control over the conversation.

Whatever you want to call it, let's change our mindset when approaching interviews.

Flipping an interview means to stop just trying to convince people that you're qualified for a role. Instead, the idea is to *have the company sell you on why you should work there.*

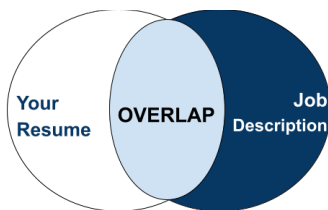
Think about this, if a company chose to interview you, why did they do it? If you asked them, won't they just tell you their favorite parts about you? More often than not, the answer is yes.

You've Already Been Chosen

You don't have the job yet, but if you have an interview, you've already been chosen. All you must do now is find out why you're an attractive candidate to them.

The Overlap

In interviewing, the person who gets the job isn't always the best fit. They're usually just the best storyteller. The best story to tell about yourself is the one that shows where there's overlap between the job description and your resume.



Uncovering The Overlap

Nobody is ever a perfect fit against a job description. Therefore, every hiring manager must take careful, calculated risks.

Even if you demonstrate huge upside potential, if you fail to "de-risk" yourself in an interview against each point in the job description, someone else is more likely to get the role.

Make yourself look like less of a risk by knowing exactly what the hiring manager needs and making sure you speak to each of these points. Lucky you, they tell you exactly what they need in job descriptions, so all you must do is prepare.

A great candidate has a response for as many bullets of a job description as possible. The response could be a story, an accomplishment, a data point.

¹ Adapted from Victory Lap Sales Training, Cohort #59, June 2021 (<http://www.victorylap.io>)

What about the areas where there is no overlap?

If you do not have experience related to one of the points, consider just asking the interviewer if they have ever hired anyone who also did not have that skill and how this person was able to be successful anyway.

Before every interview, annotate your resume or the job description. Your goal is to identify overlap between the two. You can:

1. Print out the job description, highlight its key points, and write a talking point with a piece of evidence for each.
2. Annotate a Google or Word doc, digitally highlight the key points, and insert comments with a talking point and evidence for each.

Your Advocate

Picture this: Everyone in the hiring process gathers into a meeting. Your name comes up and someone chimes in to start discussing you. What do you want this person to say? How do you want this person to tell "your story?" (Remember, your best story is how your accomplishments overlap with the job description!)

Provide your top piece of evidence that supports "your story" (the overlap) (Most people cite a resume bullet point that has a successful, concrete product or quantifiable outcome.)

Provide the next most impressive piece of evidence that supports "your story." Again, you can cite a resume bullet point or anything you think is appropriate.

Your Detractor

Every job candidate – from software developer all the way up to CEO - also carries risk. But as any talented politician knows, it helps to frame the risk *before* other people bring it up.

Picture this: The team making the hiring decision is meeting. Someone speaks and expresses a concern about your experience or your fit for the job.

What do you expect this person to say? Why do you think it was said?

Provide a piece of evidence that would be effective against your detractor to minimize or dismiss the criticism/concern. You can use an example from your resume, personal life, or anything else.

Whether or not you just realized it, you just helped people sell and defend you internally at the companies you're interviewing in.

Asking Questions – Get them talking about themselves

If you ask questions about interviewers during your conversation, are genuine in your curiosity, and can somehow relate the questions to the role, you'll make them happy. Make them happy in a conversation, and you'll stand out as a candidate.

You'll also demonstrate that you can control a conversation in a way that's pleasant and not domineering. Everyone loves this, and this includes your interviewers!

The key here is to be genuine - nobody likes lack of authenticity and brown-nosing.

Here are examples of how you can authentically ask questions of your interviewers:

1. If you notice that an interviewer was an early employee at tech company - whether it's their company or a previous one - you can ask them to talk about what it was like to be with the company as it evolved, and what lessons they might have for you. They likely have good stories that they like sharing, especially if the company went public.
2. If you notice your interviewer was a collegiate swimmer, you could ask if their coach taught something useful that helped them in their current role.
3. If you notice that the interviewer and you have something in common, cite the similarity and ask that person for advice. For example, if you are a career changer and they were too, that is a great conversation topic.

How To Respond to The Classic Questions

The necessary mindset is to frame your answers in a positive, authentic, and honest light that is focused on the requirements of the role, with bonus points for making it fit "your story" (the overlap).

If you do these things and still don't provide the answer the interviewers want to hear, it probably wasn't the right fit anyway. You're better off cutting your losses and getting ready for the next interview.

Let's look at how you can ace the basic questions you almost always hear:

"Tell me about yourself."

This is where you share your story of the overlap between you and the job description. Additionally:

- Try to avoid a pure chronological explanation.

- Provide insight to you as a person.
- Give a sense of your history.
- Include a professional accomplishment.
- Include a stat or two.
- Reinforce (without selling) your strengths, attributes and/or character.
- Keep it under 60 seconds.

Here's even more tips:

[How to perfectly answer the "tell me about yourself" interview question | ZDNet](#)

"Why this job?"

- Be concise. Keep yourself to 3 phrases/sentences.
- Use a check-in: "Can I provide you some context?" and explain aspects of your story that you haven't been able to yet.
- Don't be afraid to be honest about your motivations (yes, financial motivation is perfectly fine).
- Avoid weak language ("I'm interested in" or "I think"). Instead, use "I am" or "I will."
- It's okay to have good intentions, but avoid cliches like, "I just want to help people."

"Where do you want to be in 3 to 5 years?"

- Don't worry... many of your interviewers don't know the answer to this question themselves!
- Keep it related to software development and IT. A company is going to invest in you becoming a software developer and they want you to develop into the role. So even if you're thinking about a non-technical role down the line, avoid discussing it for now.
- It's okay to say: "While I don't know exactly, here's what I do know..."
- Provide a logical progression from this role to two more after this one.
- Management is okay to strive for, but you need to demonstrate leadership qualities in your story or this will come across as disingenuous.
- After your initial answer, follow up with, "How might you see someone with my background progressing here at _____ company?"

If you get a question you didn't expect:

At some point you will get a question that throws you off guard for a moment. It's usually best to slow down and think rather than blurt out a response that isn't thoughtful.

Here's what to do in this scenario:

1. Thank them for their question.
2. Pause.

Answer, "I'm unsure if this addresses your question, but here are my thoughts..."

"Do you have any questions for us?" – Preparing Great Questions

Every great candidate is prepared with 3 questions about the company. These questions must be based on research.

There are two purposes to this research:

1. Find the right fit: Ask informed questions to make sure the work expectations and culture are the right fit for you and that you believe in the company.
2. Demonstrate that you know how to pro-actively research the right information, an essential skill in the modern workforce.

Here are 5 steps to researching a company:

1. Google and Wikipedia the company and CEO, read the top few results;
2. Go on the company website and read their vision, mission, values, updates, and press releases;
3. Look the company up in the news, see if there are any recent press hits, new products, or challenges they face;
4. Look up the company's industry to see if there is any big changes or new opportunities that the company may expand into, but hasn't yet;
5. Look up the company's financial plans and current plans for growth and the teammates you'd work with by searching LinkedIn to understand patterns (e.g., experience level, background, etc.).

After you've completed each of these steps, you should be prepared with those 3 questions to ask about the company's growth trajectory and how it will impact your role.

Here are other tips on preparing interview questions about the role that inform you on the essentials while simultaneously making you stand out - 2 birds with one stone.

Know your role

To learn more about the role, start by reading the job description (JD). During the interview, ask a question that references the JD so they know you did your homework.

For example, "I read X in the job description, but can you provide me with day-to-day expectations you'd have for a top performer? For example, call and email volume and other tasks and processes."

Know your support system.

If it's important to you that you're supported, ask "It's important to me that I'm learning and applying best practices in this role. Can you help me understand how you'll support my learning and development?"

Know your career trajectory.

Be careful not to appear as though you want to get into software development...just to get out of software development. If you are interested in another career like Marketing, Product Management, or Sales, consider saying:

"Can you help me understand the career trajectory of software developers at ____ company? How many become senior engineers, or move into other roles? It's important to me because I like this company and want to know my long-term options."

Know your next steps

Your last interview question should be to ask for next steps. "Can you help me understand what the next steps and timeframe are for the interview process?"

Last Reminders

Be Early: Be 5 minutes early for an online interview and 15 minutes early for an in-person. If you are on-time, you are late. If you are late, you won't get the role.

Eye Contact: Digital conversations make it even harder to maintain eye contact as it's easy to forget you're talking to another person, not just a screen. Eye contact is one of the easiest ways to build rapport and maintain a positive image.

Sentences, not grunts: No one word answers! ("Yes", "No," "I think so"). This is a conversation, not a trip to the Principal's office.

Smile: It can't be overstated enough - smiling is one of the best ways to break down "stranger-danger" barriers and to help a person feel comfortable being open & honest with you.

Body language: Face and shoulders fully in screen and well lit.

Audio: Beeping smoke alarms that need new batteries, a TV, or a noisy roommate can spoil an otherwise good interview. There should be no or little unnecessary background noise, but if you have a child or a pet that makes noise, just apologize with a smile and move on. Avoid distractions when possible, but it's okay to be human.